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Vital intelligence on the Taliban may rest with its prime sponsor – Pakistan's ISI

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By Rahul Bedi in New Delhi

Pakistan's sinister Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) remains the key to providing accurate information to the US-led alliance in its war against Osama bin Laden and his Taliban hosts in Afghanistan. Known as Pakistan's 'secret army' and 'invisible government', its shadowy past is linked to political assassinations and the smuggling of narcotics as well as nuclear and missile components.

The ISI also openly backs the Taliban and fuels the 12-year-old insurgency in northern India's disputed Kashmir province by 'sponsoring' Muslim militant groups and ministering its policy of 'death by a thousand cuts' that so effectively drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan and led to their political demise.

The goings on behind the ISI's nondescript headquarters, located behind high walls on Khayban-e-Suharwady avenue in the heart of the capital Islamabad and its operational offices in the adjoining garrison town of Rawalpindi, have dominated Pakistan's domestic, nuclear and foreign policies – especially those relating to Afghanistan – for over two decades.

The ISI chief, Lt Gen Mahmood Ahmed, who was visiting Washington when New York and the Pentagon were attacked, agreed to share desperately needed information about the Taliban with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other US security officials. The CIA has well-established links with the ISI, having trained it in the 1980s to 'run' Afghan mujahideen (holy Muslim warriors), Islamic fundamentalists from Pakistan as well as Arab volunteers by providing them with arms and logistic support to evict the Soviet occupation of Kabul.

The ISI is presently the 'eyes and ears' of the US-led covert action to seize Bin Laden from the Taliban, since hundreds of its agents and their Pathan 'assets' continue to operate across Afghanistan. Its influence with the Taliban can be gauged from the inclusion of Gen Ahmed in the Pakistani military and diplomatic delegation to the militia's religious capital, Kandhar, in southern Afghanistan in an attempt to defuse the looming military crisis. The Pakistani delegation appealed to the Taliban, albeit in vain, to hand over Bin Laden to the US, which holds him responsible for the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and Washington in which nearly 7000 people are feared to have died.

Founded soon after independence in 1948 to collect intelligence in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and in East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), the ISI was modelled on Savak, the Iranian security agency, and like Savak was trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the SDECE, France's external intelligence service. The 1979 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan led the CIA, smarting from its retreat

from Vietnam, into enhancing the ISI's covert action capabilities by running mujahideen resistance groups against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Former Pakistani president General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, who was ultimately assassinated along with his ISI chief, expanded the agency's internal charter by tasking it with collecting information on local religious and political groups opposed to his military regime. Under Gen Zia the ISI's Internal Political Division reportedly assassinated Shah Nawaz Bhutto, one of the two brothers of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, by poisoning him on the French Riviera in 1985. The aim was to intimidate Miss Bhutto into not returning to Pakistan to direct the multi-party movement for the restoration of democracy, but Miss Bhutto refused to be cowed down and returned home, only to be toppled by the ISI soon after becoming prime minister in 1988.

The ISI is believed to have recently formed a secret task force under Gen Ahmed comprising Interior Minister Lt Gen (retd) Moinuddin Haider and Deputy Chief of Army Staff Lt Gen Muzaffar Usmani to 'destroy' major political parties and the separatist Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) in southern Sindh province.

This task force has reportedly encouraged not only religious Islamic organisations such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel) and Jamiat-ul-Ulema Islam (Jul) but also sectarian organisations such as the fundamentalist Sipah Sahaba and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (which are closely linked to the Taliban and Bin Laden) to extend their activities to Sindh. These organisations are believed to have 'slipped the ISI collar' and begun recruiting unemployed Sindhi rural youth for the Taliban, posing a threat to Gen Musharraf's co-operation with Washington by formenting jihad against the West.

After the ignominious Soviet withdrawal from Kabul in 1989 the ISI, determined to achieve its aim of extending Pakistan's 'strategic depth' and creating an Islamic Caliphate by controlling Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics, began sponsoring a little-known Pathan student movement in Kandhar that emerged as the Taliban. The ISI used funds from Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's federal government and from overseas Islamic remittances to enrol graduates from thousands of madrassahs (Muslim seminaries) across Pakistan to bolster the Taliban (Islamic students), who were led by the reclusive Mullah Muhammad Omar. Thereafter, through a ruthless combination of bribing Afghanistan's ruling tribal coalition (which was riven with internecine rivalry), guerrilla tactics and military support the ISI installed the Taliban regime in Kabul in 1996. It then helped to extend its control over 95 per cent of the war-torn country and bolster its military capabilities. The ISI is believed to have posted additional operatives in Afghanistan just before the 11 September attacks in the US.

Along with Osama bin Laden, intelligence sources say a number of other infamous names emerged from the 1980s ISI-CIA collaboration in Afghanistan. These included Mir Aimal Kansi, who assassinated two CIA officers outside their office in Langley, Virginia, in 1993, Ramzi Yousef and his accomplices involved in the New York World Trade Center bombing five years later as well as a host of powerful international narcotics smugglers.

Opium cultivation and heroin production in Pakistan's northern tribal belt and neighbouring Afghanistan was also a vital offshoot of the ISI-CIA co-operation. It succeeded not only in turning Soviet troops into addicts, but also in boosting heroin sales in Europe and the US through an elaborate web of well-documented deceptions, transport networks, couriers and payoffs. This, in turn, offset the cost of the decade-long anti-Soviet 'unholy war' in Afghanistan.

"The heroin dollars contributed largely to bolstering the Pakistani economy, its nuclear programme and enabled the ISI to sponsor its covert operations in Afghanistan and northern India's disputed Kashmir state," according to an Indian intelligence officer. In the 1970s, the ISI had established a division to procure military nuclear and missile technology from abroad, particularly from China and North Korea. They also smuggled in critical nuclear components and know-how from Europe – activities known to the US but ones it chose to turn a blind eye to as Washington's objective of 'humiliating' the Soviet bear remained incomplete.

A Director General, always an army officer of the rank of lieutenant general, heads the ISI, which is controlled by Pakistan's Ministry of Defence and reports directly to the chief of army staff. As the current ISI chief, Gen Ahmed is assisted by three major generals heading the agency's political,

external and administrative divisions, which are divided broadly into eight sections:

* Joint Intelligence North: responsible for the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Kashmir insurgency. This section controls the Army of Islam that comprises Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda group and Kashmiri militant groups like the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (banned by the US last week), Lashkar-e-Toiba, Al Badr and Jaissh-e-Mohammad. Lt Gen Mohammad Aziz, presently commanding the Lahore Corps and a former ISI officer, reportedly heads the Army of Islam, which also controls all opium cultivation and heroin refining and smuggling from Pakistani and Afghan territory

* Joint Intelligence Bureau: responsible for open sources and human intelligence collection locally and abroad

* Joint Counter-Intelligence Bureau: tasked with counter-intelligence activities internally and abroad

* Joint Signals Intelligence Bureau: in-charge of all communications intelligence

* Joint Intelligence Miscellaneous: responsible for covert actions abroad, particularly those related to the clandestine procurement of nuclear and missile technologies

* Joint Intelligence X: looks after administration and accounts

* Joint Intelligence Technical: collects all technical intelligence other than communications intelligence for research and development of equipment

* The Special Wing: runs the Defence Services Intelligence Academy and liaises with foreign intelligence and security agencies.

"The concern now for General Musharraf is whether the ISI will remain loyal to him and provide the US with credible information or continue to pursue its aims of ensuring the Taliban's continuance in Kabul," said one intelligence officer. The US, he added, will pull out of the region once its objectives have been achieved, but Afghanistan, with its incessant and seemingly irresolute turmoil, will remain Pakistan's neighbour for good.

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